

Stark Tragedy Awaited the Hero of This Story When He Investigated the Weird Philosophy of the Orient

The Soul of Peter Andrus

By HUBERT LA DUE

PETER ANDRUS is dead. His body lies at the foot of a simply-graven stone in the cemetery at Fairdale, and his soul. . .

But I am forgetting. I do not know that Peter Andrus, at the time of his death, had a soul. And may I, a humble country doctor, be forgiven for such heresy?

I like best to visualize Peter as a boy just entering adolescence. Dark, he was, with the features of a young Apollo, the wavy, black hair of a gypsy and the large, far-seeing eyes of a dreamer.

When I called at the Andrus home, which was often—the boy's mother was not strong—I would generally discover Peter curled up in an armchair, poring over one of the many leather-bound volumes from his late father's library. Profound books, they were, too—intricate essays on philosophy, abstract studies of the human mind, as heavy as the books themselves, hardly what one would expect a lad in knickerbockers to choose. But the father had been a deep student; at one time he had been the professor of psychology in one of the smaller universities of the state.

Or, possibly, Peter would be standing before his favorite window, looking out upon the poplar trees in the old-fashioned garden, tearing weird tunes from the strings of his violin. He played with the power of a genius and the technique of a master. Truly, a strange, baffling personality; but, withal, lovable and a young gentleman to the very tips of his slender, well-kept fingers.

I recall, also, the day, six years later, when Peter's mother was dying. I telegraphed to the boy, who was then at college, and he arrived the following morning, haggard from a sleepless night on the train.

I met him at the door. "My boy," I began, "my boy. . ." It was hard to speak to him. But he gripped my hand and did not wait for me to conclude my announcement. Somehow, he knew.

Thus it was that I assumed the role of adviser to Peter. He was twenty at the time, a tall, upstanding fellow. His

years at college had hardened, alighty, the softness of his eyes, but beneath the surface he was still a dreamer.

He did not return to college. There was much to be attended to at home during the weeks that followed; and, after that, he was content to settle down quietly with his books and music.

But when Peter was twenty-three there came an inheritance from his maternal aunt in New York. It was a large sum, even for this day, and it assured him of every comfort during the remainder of his life. At first I was troubled over its possible effect on the lad. He was not accustomed to handling large sums; indeed, he had never given finance more than a passing thought. Now there was suddenly opened up to him a broad, alluring vista, that seemed to thrill the depths of his intense being.

"It seems like a dream, Uncle Joseph!" he exclaimed, upon his return from New York, where he had gone to attend to necessary legal matters. "Now I can enjoy life!" He waved his arms in a sudden ecstasy of enthusiasm. "Life! Life! To live; to learn; to be a real personality, above the drudgery that warps and destroys the soul! It makes everything possible. . . even to marrying the girl I love. It's wonderful, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is very pleasing," I returned; "but this girl you mention, Peter—may I ask who she is?" I could think of no one in Fairdale whom Peter would choose to marry. In fact, the boy had always seemed to avoid the other sex.

He searched my face eagerly for a moment, as if doubting whether he could trust me with the secret. Somehow, I felt that I was about to learn something disquieting.

Then he spoke, half audibly:

"It's Aileen, Uncle Joseph. . . Aileen Mallory!"

I was standing at the time, but I felt a sudden need of sitting down. Dropping into my easy chair, I looked at him, feeling like a father who feared for his son.

"Aileen Mallory!" I repeated, "Aileen Mallory!" Despite my effort to restrain my feelings, a note of dismay had crept into my voice. "Peter, my boy, I am afraid. . . I don't think. . ."

He advanced toward me, fists partly clenched; and there was strong emotion in his face—anger, fierce and blazing.

"To perdition with you and your opinion," he uttered harshly. Then he turned and left the room, slamming the door behind him.

What was I to do? Could I tell him what I knew of Aileen Mallory? Would he understand the inevitable influence of heredity? Of her mother, the pretty, but hardened little chorus girl who had entrusted the girl to me, eighteen years before, whispered into my ear the name of the father—a man who was not her husband—and then passed away? Could I tell him of how I had threatened and coaxed and shamed handsome, dissipated Harry Mallory into doing his duty toward this bit of humanity?

The marriage and birth certificates Mallory had exhibited at home were forgeries—through my connivance. But would Peter believe this? He would think the whole tale nothing but the figment of a distorted and prejudiced imagination.

The girl was shallow beyond all belief. She was pretty, as the adoration of every bachelor in Fairdale testified; but she was a butterfly, with her mother's tendencies. The law of heredity could not be denied. And she was so totally different from any type of girl I would have expected Peter to marry.

They had nothing in common. She would not have been able to understand the books and essays in which he delighted; she cared nothing for music, beyond the fox-trots and tangos ground out by the orchestras at the dances she attended. Peter had none of the vices common to men; she smoked cigarettes and drank alarmingly at every opportunity. Beyond a worship of her own beautiful body, she had no religion. Peter, on the other hand, was deeply

religious in his way—even inclined to mysticism in his inherited craving for a better understanding of the powers of mind and soul.

Yes, indeed, it was an odd match, and, should they marry, I could see nothing ahead for them but stormy weather, and shoals on which eventually they would founder.

Of course, Peter came to me, following the scene of that afternoon, and apologized abjectly for his rudeness. I forgave the lad, healed his hurt with a reassurance of continued friendship; but I did not mention the girl again. . . I could not!

It was Peter himself who again mentioned her, several days later. He came to my office one gloomy afternoon, and slumped into a chair opposite my desk.

"She wants me to wait," he groaned. "Insists that the wedding be postponed for a year. A year! Three-hundred and sixty-five long days, while every atom of my being is crying out for her!"

He was suffering the mental agony known only to those of finer sensibilities. Still, I felt that this long period of waiting, dictated by the silly whim of a fluffy-headed girl, might be the means of saving Peter from his folly.

"I understand, my boy," I assured him, after several minutes of silence. "Such things are hard to bear; yet sometimes they turn out for the best. You have a year before you. Why not travel, Peter? Why not put in this time visiting those out-of-the-way places you have so often expressed a desire to see?"

He pondered for some little time.

"I'll think it over," he decided finally, and left in better humor than when he had come.

The following morning he came to my office again.

"I have considered the matter from all angles," he told me, "and I am going. If our love be real, it will be made even stronger by a few months separation, although it will be hard to endure."

But there was a new light in his eyes as he sat down and told me his plans. He was going to the Orient, he said, to the very cradle of civilization, and there investigate the strange things that were but hinted at in his books on psychology and philosophy.

"I want to find out for myself if some of these things be true," he said. "I want to delve into the farthest corners of the East, and sit at the feet of the wise men."

"It is well, Peter," I replied, hardly understanding what he had been telling me, but realizing that he had been drawn out of his somber state of mind of the day before. "Go, by all means,

and when you return you will be more satisfied to drift back into the quiet life of Fairdale."

WHEN Peter left Fairdale, three days later, I was at the depot to bid him farewell.

The girl. . . He had asked her to see him on his way, also, but she had demurred. The engagement had not yet been made public, she said, and she feared the gossips. There was a slight note of disappointment in Peter's voice as he told me of this, but if he thought it queer he did not say so.

More than ten weeks elapsed before I heard from him. At that time I received a letter, written in his usual nervous style, but pregnant with enthusiasm and the joy of new discoveries. It was dated at one of the smaller cities in the lower Bhutan district of India.

" . . . There are things in the philosophy of this land that our own wise men have never dreamed" (he wrote). "They are too wonderful to relate in this brief letter. Nothing seems impossible to the unweaned sages of this bizarre country. You and I and the others, Uncle Joseph, are as mere children.

"Do you know that but yesterday Raj Singh, one of those who have been teaching me, brought to his very feet a mongrel dog—a miserable cur that had been wandering down the village street, some distance away from where we stood. What was it that made the animal pause, turn and drag himself to the feet of the master—covering, whimpering like a damned soul? No word had been spoken—no gesture. And the dog died a moment later.

"You see?" said Raj Singh, turning to me, an odd expression hovering about his lips. "He was a cur, my friend. It is easy to kill curs. They have small souls—little will-power—"

"Possibly, then, one could kill a man in this manner—if he were a cur?" I suggested.

"If he were a cur—yes," Raj Singh replied. Then he added, hastily: "But have care, my young friend. That way lies madness—perhaps death. Such power was not granted man to be trifled with."

"So I changed the subject. But you can see for yourself that there are secrets, riddles which we of the Occident have never solved. . ."

There was much more of the same tenor, in Peter's letter. I did not under-

stand it all, myself. I still do not understand it.

However, I was overjoyed to hear from the boy. I was pleased to learn that he was happy—that he was not passing the time in pining for the girl he had left in Fairdale.

However, he had not forgotten her, as was evidenced by the closing sentences. He felt strongly, he stated, that everything was not right at home. Would I keep an eye open for him? Just what had caused this doubt to creep into his mind I do not know: at the time I presumed that he had sensed it from something in the letters she probably had written him.

I have a membership in the Country Club, but I had never been given much to social diversion. Still, to satisfy Peter—and myself—I pulled my old dress-suit from the closet and made plans to attend a few of the functions at which Aileen might be found.

It was not long before I discovered that Peter's uneasiness was not without reason. The girl was conducting herself in a manner that was causing considerable talk, even among the faster set of Fairdale. It appeared that her name was being coupled quite too often with that of a newcomer from New York—a certain Donald Hemenway.

I secured an introduction to him at the earliest opportunity. To the layman's eye he must have been a prepossessing chap, graceful, well-poised, with the manners of a prince. But a practising physician needed but one glimpse into those eyes to decide that Hemenway was not all that he should be. We passed the usual conventional words of greeting. Then, retiring to an easy chair, I watched the young New Yorker go through the mazes of a maxixe with Peter's fiancée.

I did not like the manner in which she rested herself in his arms, nor the warmth of her glances when she gazed up into his face, nor the voluptuous movements of her body as it bent and swayed in union with his to the strains of the music.

Nor was her surrender lost upon the young fellow himself. He accepted it, however, as though it were not unusual. I began to wonder just how well these two knew each other. They danced together many times—too many, in fact, for convention's sake; and with each succeeding dance, her cheeks became more flushed and her surrender more complete.

Other persons, too, were watching the couple: and when the two finally left the clubhouse, in Hemenway's big yellow roadster, eyebrows were lifted

and shoulders shrugged in a manner that was all too significant.

The next day I investigated Hemenway. I found that he was the scion of a prominent New York family, and in Fairdale presumably for his health. But information sent me by a colleague in the metropolis was to the effect that he was virtually in exile—that he had been ordered to the country by an irate father, following a scandal that had been the sensation of New York society.

That the young man had no intention, however, of leading the quiet and simple life was evident from the fact that he had brought with him two automobiles and a man-servant, and had leased for a term of months one of the most pretentious houses in town. There were rumors, already, of parties at his place, attended by young men and women who arrived in motors from other cities, which seldom broke up until the gray hours of dawn.

That Aileen Mallory had not yet attended any of these orgies, I felt reasonably certain. She thought too much of her position as the leading debutante of Fairdale to jeopardize it in such a manner. But she was a weakling, and, in consequence, I felt worried for her—and for Peter.

The problem was a perplexing one. If I could but talk it over with Peter, face to face, possibly I could make him understand. As it was, I had nothing definite to tell him; and an ill-advised word or two, expressed in cold writing, might cause him to leap to a wrong conclusion.

It was a day or two later that Hemenway came to my office, seeking advice.

"My nerves, Doctor Emerson," he explained. "All shot to pieces. Maybe a prescription, or something. . ."

"There is only one thing that will help your nerves, young man," I informed him, "and that is to discontinue your present mode of living. Late hours, liquor—no man can keep it up and not break down under the strain."

I studied him closely, while speaking. There were lines in his face that ought not to have appeared in the countenance of a man twice his age.

"You're like all the rest," he laughed, sulkily. "Always croaking. Wine, women and song—cut them out, and what's there to live for!"

"You'll begin to realize, some day, when it is too late," I added. "And while we're on the subject, may I offer another bit of advice?"

"Go ahead, I'm paying for it," he chuckled, harshly.

"This girl, Aileen Mallory—she's not one of your base, city types. She's still a good girl, and, furthermore, she is en-

gaged to marry the best friend I have in the world. I ask you, as a gentleman, to leave her alone."

For a moment, I thought he was going to strike me. Instead, he turned on his heel and started to leave the office. He stopped an instant, however, on the threshold; turned and spoke.

"And I ask you," he stated, angrily, "to mind your own business." The next moment he slammed the door, and was gone.

A little later, glancing from my window, I saw his roadster shoot down the street. Beside him sat Aileen Mallory.

THERE was a dance at the Country Club that night. With a troubled heart, I slipped into evening dress, and drove out in my old runabout.

When I arrived, the orchestra was playing some music—a weird, Oriental strain, with a seductive rhythm that wove a strange spell about the senses. There were but a few couples on the floor, and among them—Hemenway and Aileen.

I saw at a glance that the girl had been drinking. Her eyes were partly closed, and she was drifting through the intricate steps dreamily, sensuously, as though oblivious to everything about her. The Country Club had always been "dry"—even in the days before intoxicants were declared illegal. It was not difficult to guess who had given her the wine; for, when they came close, I noticed also that Hemenway's face was flushed, and that he was breathing heavily.

He gripped the girl tightly, his unglazed hand upon the soft flesh of her shoulder, and his eyes taking in hungrily the outlines of her attractively immature figure, barely concealed by the filmy and daring gown she wore.

The music ceased, and, as Hemenway caught sight of me, he led the girl off the floor, out onto the veranda. Enraged, but endeavoring to appear calm, I followed them. I found them seated in a rustic settee, in a far corner.

"Mr. Hemenway," I said, "I wish to speak to you. I am certain that Miss Mallory will excuse you, as a moment."

He looked at her quickly, as if about to protest; but she acquiesced with a half-maddened nod of her pretty head, and he arose and went with me down the steps onto the gravelled driveway.

"Well?" he asked, with an air of bravado, when we were out of earshot.

"Good God, Hemenway," I uttered tersely, "have you lost your senses? If you have no respect for yourself, at least show some toward that girl. Leave her

alone! Stay away from her! If you don't!"

"If I don't, what—?" he asked, his lip curling.

"I shall deem it necessary—"

He laughed.

"My dear doctor," he replied, in a tone that conveyed the mockery of an imp of hell, "my dear doctor, you forget yourself! Allow me to bid you a pleasant good evening, and return to the fair one who is waiting for me. *Adieu!*"

He left me standing there on the driveway, staring impotently at his back as he strode up the steps. I could have killed him cheerfully, at the moment; and now, as I look backward, I think that perhaps it would have been better if I had.

I DID NOT sleep that night. Far into the morning I lay upon my bed, tossing restlessly, and struggling to find a solution to the problem. There were moments when I decided to go to the girl and warn her; but upon calmer reflection I realized that it would be useless. She would laugh at my warning; would tell me, probably, that I was a meddling busybody, over-zealous in my efforts to protect the interests of the absent Peter.

But I could tell Peter, I decided. He had a right to know. He must be brought back immediately, before it was too late. Perhaps he could drag the girl away from the edge of the abyss on which she was flirting.

The decision to write to Peter brought order to my chaotic thoughts. I dispatched a letter to him the following day. I did not attempt to make explanation; I merely informed him that he was needed in Fairdale, and advised him to cut short his wanderings and return at once. Peter would understand. I had no fear that he would miss the significance of the message.

I calculated that it would take thirty days, at least, for my letter to reach Peter, and still another thirty for him to make the trip back.

After posting the missive, I felt better in the consciousness of a duty performed. I tried to shake the whole unpleasant affair from my mind until his return, and devoted myself assiduously to my practice.

It was on a balmy Spring morning, three weeks after the letter had started on its way, that Aileen Mallory visited my office. I saw at a glance that she had aged years since the night I had seen her at the Country Club. There were dark circles beneath her eyes; and the eyes themselves were the eyes of one who is looking into the depths of hell. Her

features were drawn and haggard. She stood there on the threshold, gazing hesitantly at me, until finally she swayed, as though immeasurably weary. Jumping to my feet, I led her to a chair. "Now, my dear girl," I urged, sitting down beside her, "tell me—tell me everything."

"I—I can't," she whispered, and buried her face in her hands. "I thought I could—but I can't."

"You must!" I insisted, and started to stroke the light spunged-off her hair that was resting on my shoulder.

She drew suddenly away from me, and sprang to her feet. A shudder passed through her slender frame.

"Please," she begged, "don't touch me! And don't look at me that way. They all know. Everybody looks at me that way. I'm a bad girl—a bad girl—Oh God!"

My telephonic bell rang just at that moment, and I rose and went into the inner office to answer it. When I returned, Aileen Mallory was gone. That day she disappeared from Fairdale. It was as mysterious as it was sudden, for she left no trace.

SIX days later, Peter Andrus returned. Late in the afternoon he walked into my office, and stood silently surveying me, while I tried to frame words of welcome.

"Peter, my boy!" I exclaimed at last. "This is unexpected!"

"I had to return," he began. "Your letter—the letter—"

"My letter!" I echoed in amazement. There could be but one letter to which he would refer in such a manner. "Why, you couldn't have received that letter! It is less than a month since I put it in the mail!"

"Yes; you are right; I didn't receive it," he went on, in a dull monotone. "But I knew—"

I was watching him in fascination. A great change had come over him. He was bronzed, and older; his eyes were pools of living fire that seemed to burn into my very soul.

"Yes, I know," he continued. "I have learned much—these past months—I have learned much!" He sighed.

"You have heard, then, about—about Aileen?" I inquired.

"No, I have heard nothing. I came directly to your office—to talk to you, before—Well, before I did anything."

I stared at him, unable to understand. A question formed on my lips, but he spoke again before I could give it utterance.

"Tell me his name!" he demanded fiercely. "Tell me what happened to her—Tell me everything!"

He sat back and scanned my face closely with those burning eyes of his. I had thought to break the news to him by easy degrees, to withhold parts of the story until later. But now I found myself, almost against my will, detailing to him minutely every event of the past three months. My own words sounded oddly to my ears, as if my voice had become detached from the rest of my being, and were a third person beyond my control. While I was speaking he did not interrupt me, and when I had concluded, he sat, silent, for several minutes. He seemed totally lost in his thoughts, and oblivious to my presence.

Rising to his feet, he began to pace nervously from one end of the room to the other, his hands clasped behind his back. Presently he stopped before my desk, and once more turned his gaze on me. His expression was uncanonically, in the depths of his eyes lurked madness, stark and wild. I shrank back in dismay.

Then he broke the silence, speaking slowly, each word distinct and vibrant as the toll of a bell. He said:

"In the sight of God, from this moment on I am a murderer!"

"Peter, not that!" I argued wildly. "Think—"

At that he laughed, scornfully, and, it seemed, pityingly.

"You fail to understand me," he interposed. "I did not say 'in the sight of man.' And now I am going out for a while, to—to make a call."

Still under his spell, I watched him put on his hat and stride from the place. A minute later I heard him crank my old runabout and start down the street. It was perhaps ten or fifteen seconds after this that my daze seemed to clear away and I found strength to rise to my feet and go out on to the veranda. Peter was not in sight.

An overwhelming fear took possession of me. Grasping the handrail for support, I tottered down the steps, and then started up the street toward Hemenway's residence.

It was several blocks distant—and I am not as young as I used to be. When I arrived at last, I found the front door ajar. My runabout was at the curb, behind Hemenway's big roadster. I climbed the stairs as rapidly as I could, and started into the living room.

I was too late. On the instant that I set foot on the threshold I saw in the semi-gloom a flash, and the crack of a pistol shot broke the silence. Then a tall form—I could not tell whose—fell headlong onto the floor, and lay silent. With palsied fingers I groped for the electric light switch beside the doorway, and turned it on.

The form on the floor was that of Donald Hemenway. He still held in his hand a small, blue-steel automatic pistol. He was quite dead, for the bullet had entered his temple.

At that moment his man-servant, who had been in the rear of the house, rushed into the room.

On the center table we found a note, in Hemenway's handwriting. The ink was not yet dry. It was *prima facie* evidence of suicide; terse but sufficient:

"I, Donald Hemenway, being unfit to live, am this day dying by my own hand, and may God have mercy on my soul."

And Peter—He found him collapsed in a large Morris chair. His eyes were open, and he seemed to be staring directly at the fallen body. There was on his face an expression of blank amazement, of surprise—the same questioning look one sometimes sees on the face of a man who has died from heart failure. He was as pale as death itself; and after I had spoken to him, and had received no answer, I feared that he was dead.

It seemed not, though. His pulse and respiration were normal. Still, when I shook him violently, he did not stir. He was, it would appear, in a state of coma from which he could not be awakened.

In fact, he did not awaken until nine days later. And when he did, he was not the Peter Andrus I had known. The light had faded from his eyes; his body, though perfect, as our medical tests showed, was a mere pulsating shell of flesh, blood and bone. He—perhaps I should not say "he"—was without mind, without memory, without will-power even to raise a hand; a living temple of God, from which the spirit seemed to have flown.

He lived, thus, until one day his body was found, stiff and cold, in bed. His powerful heart, minus the stimulus of spirit, had ceased its mechanical pulsating.

Just what transpired in Hemenway's living room that afternoon, before I arrived, I can only guess. Of course, there still remains the note—in Hemenway's own handwriting. Yet there is a strange error in my mind; I cannot cast off the doubt that pervades it.

Was Peter Andrus correct when he proclaimed himself a murderer "in the sight of God?" Or did he die at peace with his Maker, and did his soul—

But there again, I have forgotten. I am an old man, strong in the faith, and may I be forgiven for such heresy; but I do not know that Peter Andrus, at the time of his death, had a soul.

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